

Apple iPod: The new public access?

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I have to admit that I've never been a fan of Apple's iPod -- for reasons too numerous to mention in this story -- but Apple has finally added the killer feature to its ubiquitous, market-dominating MP3 player: video. Sure, the company is late to the portable "media center" game, but unlike its competitors, Apple actually got it right. The picture is simply amazing, and it's opened the doors for independent producers to start dreaming about this new alternative way to distribute their content.

While Apple seems focused on making mainstream "repurposed" broadcast network programming its focus, it's the independent producers

who really seem keen on the idea of taking advantage of the platform.

George Wood, CEO of Flights of Fantasy Media, has had a tough time distributing his content (through mainstream channels), which includes the Academy Award Winning Documentary Series, "Hollywood Goes To War." He sees an opportunity in vodcasting (video podcasting) and distributing his programming on iPods and similar services.

"What I like about vodcasting is that it allows independent producers to self-publish their own syndicated 'shows,' and it gives them as well as standard broadcast radio or television programs a new distribution method that goes directly to their target audience," said Wood.

"Since any electronic device with the proper software can play vodcasts our shows can go on millions of iPods, media players, cell phones, computers, game consoles and other devices in the prototype stages and achieve a high level of market penetration very quickly. Anyone can get the content they want when they want it, where they want it, and how they want it. And they stick around for more," Wood said.

He added, "Unlike streaming programs where you have to be in front of the computer to see them, vodcasts are received in their archived format. Ready to be seen at your leisure. The downloaded episodes can then be played, replayed, or stored like any other computer file. You control what you want to see and hear, making your own audio and visual playlists."

While the dream of being an independent producer is alive and well, and gaining more ground, there are people who are still skeptical about the market impact of this new technology.

Frank Barnako, vice president of CBS MarketWatch, said, "I am not so sold in vodcasting. Not only can't you say it without having someone say,

'What?' They're just damn difficult to produce. That's why I like radio. One person, one idea, one button, boom you're done. TV ... takes people, equipment, lighting framing, directing, editing, and so on. I think there are enough examples of 'pod fade' to suggest that some people have found podcasts too demanding; the same will happen for vodcasts.

"Besides, video is also not as usable as audio. Sure you can carry it in a device, but video requires more attention. Our eyes are drawn to the flickering screen -- and that's distracting. You can't consume vodcasts like peanuts, the way you can audio. It's just not as user-friendly."

Some users, however, seem to feel differently. Jennifer Bishop, a program associate at the National Academy of Sciences, said, "I just received an iPod Video as an early Christmas present, and I use it to watch video podcasts. My favorite is tuscanypodtravels.tv, which is a frequently updated podcast documenting travels in Tuscany. It is really beautifully filmed. The person doing the filming never intrudes on the scene, even to explain what is going on -- there is just a camera there, recording 10 minutes or so of Tuscans going about their activities of olive harvesting, cooking, hog raising, winemaking, or monks singing a mass. It's wonderful to have this window into another world during my long and uncomfortable subway commute."

She added, "I also watch Rocketboom, which is sort of a free-form humorous techie news show, Daily Planet TV, which is a science show, and Chasing Windmills, which is sort of a cynical young urban sitcom. I have also watched a few TV offerings available through iTunes, but I find that I enjoy the amateur stuff a lot more."

Wood, of Flights of Fantasy Media, notes, "Streaming media is more like traditional broadcast radio and television, vodcasting is more like joining a DVD-of-the-month club. The monthly subscription system is beginning to work for the music download sites and I think it will work

equally well for vodcasting."

He added, "We are in the process of building a vodcast network for vodcasts of all types, aggregating them into channels and genres. Kind of like XM for video. This way, the independent's voices can be heard equally with the big boys and new exciting stories, films and messages can be told. Who knows, maybe the next Peter Jackson (Lord of the Rings) is only a vodcast away."

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